



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Citizen: An American Lyric

by Claudia Rankine

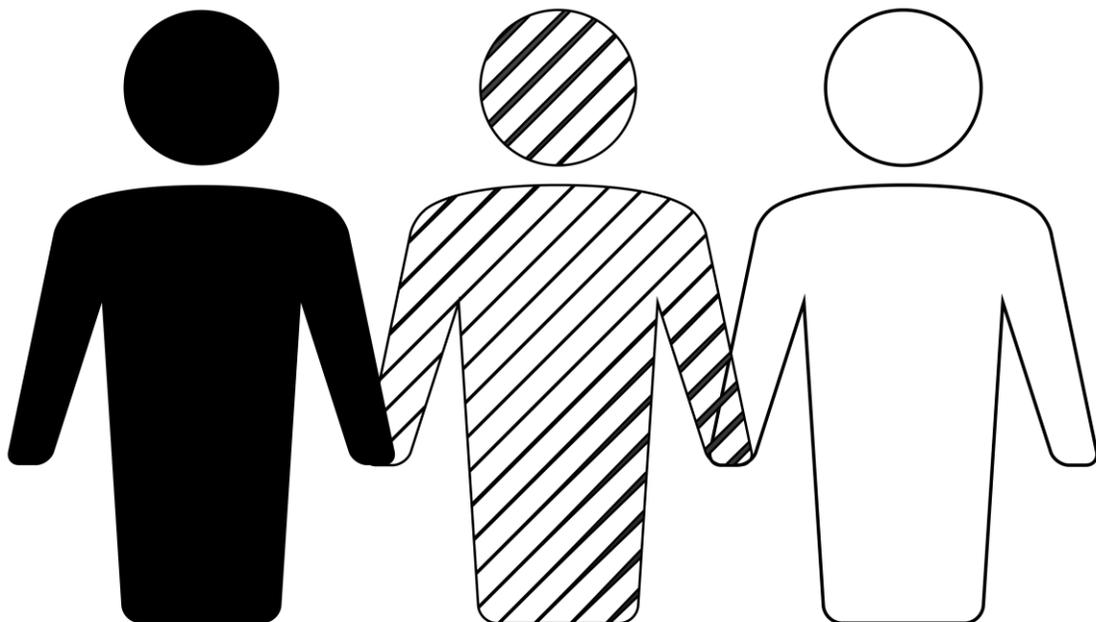


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“Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on.”

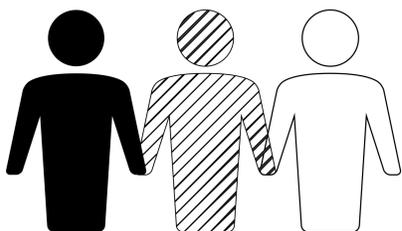
Preface

Jamaican-born author Claudia Rankine is the author of five collections of poetry, two plays, and numerous video collaborations. *Citizen: An American Lyric* is sweeping the country, already chosen by dozens of schools and centers as a community read book. It was a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry and winner of the NAACP Image Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, the PEN Open Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry while at the same time was a finalist for the same award in criticism. It was also named one of the best books of the year by numerous media outlets, including *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, National Public Radio, and *Publisher's Weekly*. The book lays bare moments of racism that often surface in everyday encounters. It combines poetry with commentary, visual art, quotations from artists and critics, slogans, and scripts for films. It's "an anatomy of American racism in the new millennium" (*Bookforum*) and "an especially vital book for this moment in time" (*The New Yorker*).

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

"I love language because when it succeeds, for me, it doesn't just tell me something. It enacts something." — Claudia Rankine in *Guernica*

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, published by Graywolf Press in 2014, is the first work of poetry to become a New York Times bestseller for multiple weeks on the paperback nonfiction list. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry, and was also a finalist for the award in criticism, the first time in the history of those awards that a book was named a finalist in more than one category. "A classic that will be read, referred to and reflected on for generations" (Lit Hub), *Citizen* is a genre-bending work of art combining lyric prose with internal monologues, visual art, slogans, photographs, quotes, a screen grab from YouTube, and film scripts. It is a touchstone for talking candidly about racism. And it is a time capsule of contemporary headlines and key figures, with references to, among other things, Hurricane Katrina, the tennis champion Serena Williams, the 2006 World Cup, and the fatal shooting of Florida resident Trayvon Martin. "So groundbreaking is Rankine's work that it's almost impossible to describe," writes the Los Angeles Times. It "forces you to observe: what's outside the window, what's on the television, what's at the margins of the painting, and what's happening—whether you admit it or not—at the margins of your mind" (The Believer).

Through a series of vignettes, the book recounts everyday moments of racism "of a kind that accumulate until they become a poisonous scourge: being skipped in line at the pharmacy by a white man, because he has failed to notice you in front of him; being told approvingly, as a schoolchild, that your features are like those of a white person; being furiously accosted by a trauma therapist who does not believe that the patient she is expecting could look like you" (The New Yorker). "I started working on *Citizen* as a way of talking about invisible racism—moments that you experience and that happen really fast," Rankine told The New Yorker. "They go by at lightning speed, and you begin to distrust that they even happened, and yet you know that you feel bad somehow." She asked friends to share stories of those moments, and then combined them with stories of her own moments and those she observed in our culture. "We are social animals," she told The Spectacle. "We want connection. We want ... understanding. We want intimacy. But if the terms of that intimacy feel dishonest, or feel only



possible with the acceptance of your erasure, then that's painful." Rankine frequently uses the second person "to say, 'Step in here with me, because there is no me without you inside this dynamic'" (Buzzfeed).

The book's unusual trim size and heavier paper hint at the beauty and weight of what readers will discover inside its pages, as does the book's cover art, a 1993 piece called "In the Hood" by artist David Hammons. Similarly, the artwork inside the book reverberates off the words. "I was attracted to images engaged in conversation with an incoherence ... in the world," Rankine told *BOMB Magazine*. "They were placed in the text where I thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would." Amidst a piece detailing Williams' frustrations on the tennis court is a photo of a "Soundsuit," an art piece by the fabric sculptor, dancer, and performance artist Nick Cave. "If the person wearing this suit stood up, what you would see is a dark black covering," explains Rankine to *The Believer*. "But if she bent over, then you got this kind of beautiful color that was acceptable, even dazzling, to whoever was looking. I thought this enacted the public expectations for Serena, the desire for her to look a certain way."

Among the many other awards *Citizen* has received are the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in poetry, the Forward Prize for Best Collection in Great Britain, the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, the PEN Open Book Award, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in poetry; the book was also named a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry and the T. S. Eliot Prize in Great Britain, and was performed on stage at the Fountain Theatre in Los Angeles. Rankine "is a writer whose genius must be trusted," says her editor at Graywolf, Jeff Shotts. "Often the vision is larger than the page ... but then seeing the multi-faceted ways that she finds to present the work inside the vessel of the book is amazing."

Asked what her motto is, Rankine refers to the collagist Romare Bearden. "He said, 'There are all kinds of people, and they will help you if you let them.' As somebody who collaborates a lot, I take that to heart, and I certainly would hope that other people would see me as one of those people who would help them, if they would let me" (*Radio Open Source*).

About the Author

Claudia Rankine (b. 1963)

"Her answers, like her book, never shy away from the harsh truth. But one senses that she believes, that she actually imagines a better reality."

— *The Believer*

Claudia Rankine is an observer: of people and society, of words and language, of everyday voices and the voice of history, of the person at the store and the crowds on TV, of the body's gestures and the body politic. "I'm always looking," she told *Radio Open Source*.



Claudia Rankine
(photo: John Lucas)

Rankine was born in Jamaica, but she moved with her family when she was seven to the Bronx, where she attended Catholic primary schools. Her father worked as a hospital orderly; her mother a nurse's aide. They were avid readers. Rankine remembers her mother reading her Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" shortly after they moved to the U.S. It was in her youth that she also learned to see American culture both from within and as an outsider. "My mother would say things like 'American blacks' or 'American whites,' identifying herself as a Jamaican as she was trying to make sense of a new culture.... I was always negotiating two cultures as a child" (*The Spectacle*).

In college, Rankine studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Louise Glück and was especially influenced by the work of James Baldwin and the poetry of Adrienne Rich. "My initial understanding of feminism and racism came from these two writers," Rankine writes in her introduction to Rich's *Collected Poems 1950-2012*. After college, she decided against law school to pursue creative writing. "Becoming a poet seemed like a risky career choice, but it felt like a calling—I didn't argue" (Forward Arts Foundation).

Her career as an accomplished, award-winning poet includes the publication of five volumes of poetry, two plays, and various essays and pieces for prominent magazines. She is the editor of several poetry anthologies and serves as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Following the 2004 release of her celebrated book *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine was commissioned by the Foundry Theatre in New York to write about the South Bronx. The result, *The Provenance of Beauty, A South Bronx Travelogue*, ran in 2009 and took audiences on a bus tour with a live narrator

and pre-recorded poetic commentary on the passing landscape.

In 2016, following ten years of teaching at Pomona College in Claremont, California, she was named the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry at Yale University. "I think poetry has no investment in anything besides openness," she told *Guernica*. "It's not arguing a point. It's creating an environment."

The environment Rankine creates in her more recent books, like her play in the South Bronx, is one without conventional artistic boundaries: she combines poetry and prose with visual artwork and, in the case of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, accompanying films called "situation videos," curated in collaboration with her husband, the artist and filmmaker John Lucas. "I'm not interested in illustrating the text," she says, "but I am interested in creating conversations between the text and the images" (*The Spectacle*).

Since the publication of *Citizen*, a powerful and direct engagement with race and violence in present-day American culture, Rankine has done hundreds of readings, keynotes, interviews, and lectures about her book and the subject of racism, particularly in the ubiquitous, everyday exchanges between individuals and in the media. "Sports is one of the places where race plays itself out publicly," she told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Although we pretend it doesn't." Asked how she became interested in the tennis player Serena Williams, who appears in *Citizen*, Rankine told *Vulture*, "I was really interested in Tiger Woods when he arrived on the scene. My husband was a big golf fan, and he would watch and I would be in the other room listening to the commentators. The ways in which [Woods] was always being accused of breaking the rules made me begin to watch when it was on, and that somehow led me to watching Serena and Venus. Then I started playing tennis myself."

"Rankine is part of the long and exalted tradition of the artist who makes something meaningful from the raw stuff of adversity. She has made art from oppression" (*The Hairsplitter*). "I love language," Rankine says, "because when it succeeds, for me, it doesn't just tell me something. It enacts something. It creates something. And it goes both ways. Sometimes it's violent. Sometimes it hurts you. And sometimes it saves you" (*Guernica*).

Discussion Questions

1. What words, definitions, or ideas do you associate with the word “citizen”? Do these associations line up with one group of people?
2. Rankine addresses “you” throughout the book. Where do you recognize yourself in the encounters described in *Citizen*, if at all? What perspectives or angles of experience were you surprised to inhabit, and why?
3. Look up “lyric” in the dictionary, or do an internet search for “lyric poetry.” How does Rankine’s use of “lyric” in the subtitle of *Citizen* both adhere to and challenge these definitions and usages?
4. How do the visual images in *Citizen* affect your reading of the text? What does the image of Caroline Wozniacki on page 37 express that can’t be expressed by words alone? Would you react differently without the image? What does the work of art on page 19 evoke in relation to the text about the experience on the therapist’s doorstep?
5. On page 131, Rankine narrates the act of sitting down in an empty seat next to a man on a train, a seat others have avoided. What does this kind of close attention to the human body have to do with race and racism? How has your perception of your own body, of the way you physically occupy space, shifted after reading *Citizen*?
6. *Citizen* narrates many instances of micro-aggressions—individual acts of racism that collectively form the crushing experience of racism in America. Is racism a singular action, or is it a series of acts? What is the difference between the singular action and the accumulation of them?
7. As *Citizen* has been reprinted, the different editions have incorporated changes to the text, most notably the inclusion on page 134 of the names of African Americans killed since previous printings. How does this evolution align with the book’s core questions and preoccupations? Are there other ways in which *Citizen* feels like a book that has changed in light of more recent events?
8. Many readers and critics have pointed out that *Citizen* defies established genre distinctions (it was even nominated for National Book Critics Circle Awards in both the Poetry and Criticism categories). Reading *Citizen*, did you think of it as poetry? As prose? Does it matter?
9. *Citizen*’s discussion of Serena and Venus Williams includes the Zora Neale Hurston quote, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” How does this quote encapsulate the Williams sisters’ experience in the world of professional tennis? How does this quote relate to *Citizen* as a whole?
10. Referring again to Serena Williams, Rankine states, “Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.” How do sports in particular encourage spectators and officials to assume influence or even ownership over the bodies of the players? Does this have parallels to other arenas of American life?
11. How does *Citizen* portray and address the privileged position of white Americans? How does Rankine also show the effects of a racist system on those white Americans?
12. What associations does the image on the cover of book bring up for you? Is it surprising that the work of art it depicts, *In the Hood* by David Hammons, was first exhibited in 1993? How does *In the Hood* relate to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012? What does this seemingly disjointed timeframe say about the deadly effects of racism in America?
13. How do you interpret the choice to use of J.M.W. Turner’s painting *The Slave Ship* as the concluding image in *Citizen*? Why is it important that the detail is pictured alongside the full painting?

Additional Resources

To learn about using *Citizen: An American Lyric* as a teaching tool, check out this resource on the publisher's website: <https://www.graywolfpress.org/resources/citizen-classroom-citizen-world>.

Credits



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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